Rev. George Richards's Discourse,

INTRODUCTORY TO HIS SOLE PASTORATE.

DELIVERED IN CENTRAL CHURCH, BOSTON, OCT. 19, 1851.

A

DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTORY TO HIS SOLE PASTORATE,

BY

GEORGE RICHARDS.

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DISCOURSE.

1 KINGS, xx. 11.

LET NOT HIM THAT GIRDETH ON HIS HARNESS BOAST HIMSELF AS HE THAT PUTTETH IT OFF.

He that *putteth it off!*

A few weeks ago, this house was the house of mourning. This pulpit, these columns, these walls, were draped in the habiliments of wo. The light of heaven was dimmed. A solemn, speechless, weeping auditory crowded these seats and aisles. And there, the man of God!

A few weeks earlier, he stood where I stand. His voice filled the sanctuary. His finger pointed to God. His eye wandered from face to face, over the congregation. His countenance, — grave, thoughtful, tender, furrowed by many toils, shadowed by many cares, — told in every

feature and lineament his deep interest in our welfare. The tired soldier was at his post. Conflicts, many and arduous, seemed before him. The heavy harness was upon him; — he hath put it off.

Boasting befits not the grave nor heaven. They who have run well and attained the prize, cast their trophies before the throne, ascribing "Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."

We may look back upon the past, not boastfully, perhaps, but gratefully. We may congratulate ourselves and one another that the prime of a life, so useful, was passed in this community; that a ministry, so fruitful of good, was allotted this church and people; that we and our children have been blessed with influences so winning, so elevating, so wisely adapted to promote our temporal and eternal well-being.

Let us, then, on the threshold of new relationships, ere we contemplate what *is* and is *to be*, revert to what *has* been, — to the drama that has

closed, whose scenes have passed successively before us, and on which the sombre curtain has fallen.

What were the elements of its power? The secret of its success?

Much, unquestionably, — most, under God, was due to the *personal* qualities and endowments of the chief actor; to the strong sense, the far-sighted wisdom, the firmness, courage, independence, the high and honorable sentiments, the magnanimity, generosity, piety, — traits, too familiar to you to need enumeration, and which secured him the place in your confidence and affection, which he held to the end.

Besides these, he was the *First Pastor* of this church and people, — essentially the Founder, and the Father of this religious enterprise. Preliminary steps had been taken, anterior to his call and settlement. The nucleus had been formed, the body had been organized, — he breathed into it the breath of life. A church may exist for centuries. A long line of godly and useful men

may minister at its altar, offer its oblations, intercede at the mercy-seat, proclaim the living oracles. The succession may be perpetual, uninterrupted, — youth stepping unchallenged into the place of age, the hand withered with years, tremulous with toils — passing on to fresher fingers the blazing censer of devotion. Still, *one* only can be *first*, — the earthly fountain and wellspring of spiritual light and life.

Such was he who has just deserted us; — your *first love!*

He had another especial title to your confidence, in the fact, that he was with you *in and through your trials.*

I refer not to private griefs, in which he largely sympathized, which he largely shared — but to calamities that befell or threatened the church itself, — that crippled its resources, darkened its horizon, menaced its existence. We — whose relations to you date not back of this "holy and beautiful house," these auditories, the encroachments of death and change repaired by new and waiting applicants, pecuniary demands known

only to be met; — we can hardly picture to ourselves the anxious deliberations, the seasons of prayer and watching, the burden of accumulating debt; hope ebbing and yielding to the onward march of discouragement and defeat. Most enterprises have such hours and crises. He who lives through them, who carries others through them, who proves equal to and superior to the exigency, who has the force and self-reliance, not merely to brave dangers himself, but to infuse strength into the weak and courage into the faint-hearted, — he secures, and justly, a foothold and vantage-ground, which no smooth-sea and fair-weather heroes may hope to emulate. Adversity knits men with links of steel. They float, or they drown together.

How many of you look back to the days, when what was and is a stage became a church; — tragedy, comedy, farce, pantomime, interrupted, for a while, by the sweet gospel of salvation — mimicry supplanted by reality — the actor by the man! You feel that those were your best days, — the genial spring, the golden autumn of your religious life, — the days when the church was the home of the soul; when the brotherhood

was not a name ; when common doubts, common fears, common cares, common toils, banded you to each other and to Christ. You remember! And whose form towers amid those thronging memories? Whose face sheds light, again, amid the darkness? Whose trumpet-voice summons to duty and to trust? His, who yesterday was with us.

Still another element of power in the past, has been its *unity in sentiment and action.*

Men of marked individuality, frank in the expression of their opinions, resolute in maintaining them, naturally rally round them those of the like stamp, or who, if originally different, become in process of time assimilated. Should any be drawn in, whose tastes and habits are irreconcilably at variance, they, in the lapse of months and years, comprehend their position, and look elsewhere for the fellowship they crave. So, in the main, has it been among yourselves. A man of the strong points I have delineated, starting with you, continuing with you, pursuing with undeviating step a policy, the perfect transcript of his own mind and character, was enabled to

produce, could not but produce, a homogeneousness of thought and feeling, which to ordinary men, or under ordinary circumstances, would have been impracticable.

A still more prominent feature in the past, has been *that policy itself.*

All forces, physical and mental, to operate to advantage, must operate according to their laws, and in their legitimate orbits. Trammel them by foreign restraints, compel them to work against their will, curb their spontaneous impulses — they grow tame, spiritless, inefficient.

The man who is to make a powerful and permanent impression upon others, must draw his inspiration from above and from within. He must have deep convictions, convictions his own, part and parcel of his being, and be left at liberty to act up to them. In a word, he must be free to do his own work in his own way.

What course did the mind we are considering, shape for itself?

It was a course, you will bear me witness, conservative and not radical; consistent and not erratic; steady and not impulsive. The new-fangled inventions, which in piety as in politics are the rage to-day, discarded to-morrow; the zeal, less wise than ardent, which must carry outwork and citadel by assault, put sin and error to the sword, allow neither parley nor quarter, when a brief armistice, or a flag of truce, might have summoned to surrender; the stirring activity, which must be ever on the go, rests not day nor night, whose feet, like the pagan Mercury's, seem winged, never so uneasy as when shut up to its own quiet and solitary thoughts; — these all he left to others.

And what was his enginery for doing good?

The Sabbath! — the day of rest and of worship — the fever of life intermitted — its throbbing pulses stayed.

The Bible! — preached from the pulpit, condensed in the catechism, pondered in the closet, taught in the school, distributed, broad-cast, over the land and the world.

The Sanctuary! — holy ground — the world putting off its sandals before the present Deity. Not the mart of traffic, nor the forum of politics, nor the lyceum of letters, nor the arena of debate, — but the House of God, and the Gate of Heaven.

A Ministry,—educated; aptness to teach founded in willingness to learn, faculties disciplined, views enlarged, errors corrected: — a settled ministry; laying its plans broad, building for futurity, reaping what it had sown, garnering what it had reaped, watching what it had garnered: — a responsible ministry; known, tried, found faithful, living where it labored, tested in the intercourse of life, rooted in the memories as well as the hearts of the people.

The Church! — the nursery of knowledge and of piety, of good morals and good manners; the asylum for human guilt and human woes; the bulwark of religion and of government; against which the madness of earth and the gates of hell shall not prevail.

Such the instrumentalities relied upon.

And the result aimed at?—Religion! founded in principle, reduced to practice, implanted in the heart, fruitful in the life; devout praying alternating with consistent living; attendance upon meetings, the personal appeal, the public exhortation, with scrupulous honesty in trade, liberality in giving, a serene and Christ-like temper, courtesy in social intercourse, a spirit frank, open, above-board, that would scorn a paltry action, whether performed for Christ or for mammon.

Mere temporary excitements, more physical than spiritual, the offspring of nerves overstrained, brains overplied, fostered by highly-wrought appeals, exhausting vigils, services injudiciously multiplied, injudiciously protracted,—excitements to be succeeded, in their turn, by disastrous reaction, fatal relapse, a monotony yet more hopeless and remediless; the dead, whom the storm and uproar had brought upward to the surface, sinking back into their graves,—these excitements guarded, constrained, held subordinate to more healthful instrumentalities; to piety instilled in the nursery, blended with family devotions, deepened in the Sabbath school, en-

lightened in the sanctuary; piety inwoven with the pleasures and pains, the successes and reverses, the labors and the rest of life.

Such piety, revived where it existed, implanted where it did not; its earnest culture, the business not of special occasions, but of all occasions, not of a month, but of a probation.

Such reviving, such implanting, the result of effort, of painstaking,—not impulsive and erratic, but serious, methodical, continuous, regardful of time and place and circumstance, and the proprieties of things;—painstaking, futile in itself, made effectual by prayer and tears, by the answer of God's Spirit; not blasting like the lightning, nor sweeping like the tempest; "dropping as the rain, distilling as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass."

Such were the means resorted to, such the end they were to answer.

But this Ministry has ended! The Steward has given account of his stewardship. The

Warrior rests upon his arms. The din of battle has died into the silence of the tomb.

"After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

"Let not him that *girdeth on* his harness, boast himself as he that *putteth it off*."

Him that *girdeth on* his harness!

The sods have been heaped above the coffin. The procession has returned. The drapery is taken down. The light of heaven is readmitted. The living, alas! is in the place of the dead!

No Ministry should begin with boasting. No occupation should. It is time to recount our victories when we have won them; to pride ourselves on a valor and prowess which we have proved. The merchant, if discreet and honest, spends not the wealth which he hopes to own, now hanging on distant and doubtful ventures, at hazard of wind and wave,—he spends what he has earned.

No minister, I should suppose, can enter on his duties, sanguine, confident, with high-wrought expectations. Boasting, certainly, is excluded.

Ignorant, — he is to teach; to teach truths whose depths no finite line can fathom, the grand store-house of his facts and illustrations already in possession of every hearer, — lessons old, worn by constant repetition, to be dressed out in new hues and garbs.

Dull to spiritual things — his moral sensibilities blunted — life and death in him, at best, in hand to hand encounter, — he must quicken the torpid pulse of others, rouse them to ever higher aspirations and attainments. He is out on a storm-beat coast, the wave strewn with wrecks, his office to rob the deep of its prey, to drag the dying from their doom — when all the while, the frail life-boat that carries him careens with every surge, shivers in every blast.

He is to adapt himself to the most varied tastes and trainings, to the strong and to the weak, to the uncultivated and the refined, to the ardent and the subdued. All things to all men, if by any means he may save some.

"Who is sufficient for these things?"

Least of all, may he boast, who to the trials and duties inevitably attendant on the ministry, has superadded burdens.

Let him be installed, for example, over a church like this, in the heart of a metropolis, a vast mart of commerce, a hive of busy industry, a focus of intellectual, moral and religious light and life; the population he is to know and reach, ebbing and flowing like the tide, and hardly more susceptible to permanent impressions; calls on his time and thoughts numberless, foreign, many of them, to his office and pursuits, yet from which no seclusion or privacy is sacred; expected, amid all, to be a scholar, to be a thinker, to secure the pulpit that deference, that influence, which the sanctified learning and eloquence of ages have earned for it, which the veneration of ages has awarded it, but which in the sharp rivalry of other and competing agencies and interests, must be struggled for, to be maintained.

Let this adventurer in untried fields succeed a man, inferior to few in counsel or in action, a man

of commanding character and winning fascination, who could attract multitudes to the sanctuary, if for no better reasons, from strong personal attachment. Such a post—no sinecure to any body—would be doubly difficult to one, of comparative youth and inexperience, holding hitherto a subordinate position, with the disadvantages its inevitable attendants; one, whose whole ministerial career had been spent upon the ground, bringing with him no charms of novelty, no stores accumulated in other fields and other years, to ease the weight of present, pressing responsibilities; one, who, under circumstances the most favorable, would need large measures of encouragement and aid.

Such I stand here, to-day. Should I not, may I not, must I not throw myself on your generous consideration?

I might appeal to the love ye bore the Dead! Six years have we divided the labors of this pulpit. Six years have we presided, side by side, at this board. Six years of joys and sorrows, at your firesides, by your graves. We

have been united in heart and life, in principle and action ; — I am alone ! The one has been taken, and the other left.

The crisis appeals to you ! A new leaf is turned over in your history. A new era is to be recorded in your annals. The head of the family is struck down. The onward current of prosperity is stayed. The cloud of adversity is over us. No efforts but the heartiest, whoever were the pilot, could carry you past the breakers, into the clear and open sea.

By the vows you have uttered at this altar, and repeated at this table ; by your allegiance to Christ and to his cause ; by your obligations to the brotherhood, and the world, you are urged and impelled to action.

Not Ministers, alone, have duties, which they are to neglect or to discharge. Not Ministers, alone, are mortal or immortal. Not Ministers, alone, must answer for their omissions, or their commissions, at the bar of God.

You have called me, if I understand you, to

carry on what has been begun. The policy of the past, in its leading features, is to be the policy of the future. You have, over and over again, endorsed it. You retained here its prime author and originator, with his will, against his will, that the same order, the same harmony, the same liberality of sentiment, the same wise conservatism, which has prevailed, may be perpetuated. I expect your friendly, your hearty, your considerate co-operation. I rely on it, or I should not be here. Under God, it is the sheet-anchor of my hopes. Mine in the past, far outrunning my deserts, it will be mine also in the future. Common memories unite us. Common griefs bind us to each other. We are mourners met around the grave. We join hands above the dead.

From Eternity, a voice breaks on me, to-day:— "My Brother, solemn responsibilities are on you; how solemn, these scenes and retributions, in which I mingle, alone can witness. Make the past the beacon for the future; a light, at once to warn and to guide. Pursue the same ends, by the same means; but with tenfold diligence,

ardor, self-consecration. Sacrifice not permanent results to transient. Inculcate a deep, practical, consistent piety. By prayer, by holy living, by affectionate but plain and pungent exhortation — in season, out of season—whether they will hear, whether they will forbear — commend yourself to every man's conscience, in the sight of God. So live, and love, and labor, that should Death seek there another mark, tears, as sincere, may fall on another coffin ; and in the day of reckoning, when we face them at the judgment, they and their children, an unbroken company, may own us the humble instruments of their sanctification and salvation ! "